OUTRAGEOUS GRACE

November 8, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 18:21-35

"'Lord, how often shall I forgive him?' Jesus said, 'seventy times seven.'" -Matthew 18:21,22(RSV)

"There is more nonsense spoken during the hour of eleven to twelve on Sunday morning than at any other time during the week." So says a friend of mine, Eric Dean, Chaplain and Professor of Humanities at Wabash College. Eric is a bright, salty, properly irreverent English Presbyterian - of which there are all too few. He wrote a book several years ago under the intriguing title Good News About Sin. In it he observes that there is a lot of nonsense spoken from the pulpit:

"A nonsense - proposition of wide acceptance is that when a man knows he has wronged another person, he wants to be forgiven. 'Please forgive me' is a phrase that comes readily to the lips of each of us, but it is rarely said with much sincerity. When the minister says in the sermon that men and women long to be forgiven for their sins, most members of the congregation know that he is wrong, but they won't hold it against him. After all, one of the prime characteristics desired in a minister is that he be as naive as our language suggests we think God also to be."

Then Dean gets off what I thought was a very provocative observation...

"One of the hard facts of life, well-known to most people, is that forgiveness is pretty hard to take."

Well, now, that's a twist isn't it? I'm more inclined to assume that guilt is our problem. I've read, adnauseam, about the heavy load of guilt modern Americans carry around with them; that guilt is endemic to the human condition. I've read the Freudian proposal that the potential for self-imposed guilt feelings exist in each of us if and when we do experience rejection. I've read a lot about the way religion manipulates our vulnerability to guilt, by teaching that we are sinners, condemned to

punishment and that the only way out is to play by the rules religion lays down.

My personal religious pilgrimage took a major turn when I heard about grace, when finally it got through to me that God's love for me does not depend on anything in me; that God - like that wonderful father in the parable of the Prodigal Son - comes down the road after this lost son or daughter with arms open wide; that there is a divine embrace for me and you before we can even mumble our carefully rehearsed apologies. My personal spirituality was enormously energized by the discovery that religion is the joyful celebration of God's love. It is the way I have of saying "thank you" for what God has done, a corporate shout of praise and adoration for God's grace - and not, as it sometimes appears, the grim, tight-lipped effort to live primly and properly enough to persuade God to let me into his apparently high-walled, and tightly secured and virtually inaccessible Kingdom.

Forgiveness, I assume, is at the very heart of the matter. The high point of worship comes when I've had opportunity to acknowledge my less-than-perfect state and I hear - "Friends, believe the Good News. In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

And here comes my friend Eric down at Wabash saying "forgiveness is pretty hard to take."

Yet when we do probe a bit beneath the surface of what seems to be a fairly simple matter, we discover that Eric Dean is not alone. In fact, maybe it isn't simple at all.

C. S. Lewis, for instance, whose book Mere Christianity has introduced the faith to countless inquiries, wrote, "Everyone says forgiveness is a lovely idea, until they have something to forgive... And then to mention the subject at all is to be greeted by howls of laughter." [p. 89] It may be hard to acknowledge our need for forgiveness, but it may be even more difficult and costly to offer forgiveness to others.

The whole of history after all has proceeded on the basis of retaliation as the normal and most effective response to personal or corporate offense. It's there in the Old Testament - "an eye for an eye"... never mind the fact that the obvious result is that now there are two blind people instead of one and that everyone around them will now feel the effect of and pay for their mutual blindness (which may be what it feels like to live in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf).

In any event, deep in each of us is a sense of self which is offended and angry when it is invaded and which, it seems to me, automatically strikes out and back at the offender. Push us hard enough and we'll push back. Do you remember that wonderful sequence in Witness, when the tough Philadelphia cop, posing as a gentle Amish farmer, is accosted and verbally abused by several young punks, while he's sitting in his buggy in the middle of town? Do you remember how that dynamic literally gets inside you and in spite of your better judgment you want very badly for that cop to teach those punks a lesson; and how, as he does it, you start to cheer and as he pounds them around, you feel deeply that justice is being done? And

then do you recall how you probably miss the fact that this retaliation is the first step in a descent into bloody violence that will explode in the midst of Amish culture and very nearly destroy it?

It is deep in us. And I have learned about it personally. I confess - with no pride - that when I am invaded - my first response is not forgiveness but retaliation. In one of the slickest scams I have ever seen, I had my wallet taken recently - by three young men. I was not harmed, at least physically. It was so smooth I almost have to admire their skill, in retrospect. It was quick, painless, and when I discovered what had just happened, it was altogether too late - and a good thing it was, because my initial response was anger, rage. I wanted very much to be able to retaliate. And I felt like that for a long time afterward... humiliated, invaded and very angry. What Bernard Goetz did cannot ever be condoned or excused, because if you've had your wallet lifted, or purse snatched, or worse, you know the dynamic. You know how close to the surface his mentality is in all of us.

Christian faith teaches that we live in God's kingdom where we forgive each other; that our health and wholeness as human beings depends on our knowing that we are forgiven and accepted by our creator. The part of the equation that is virtually ignored, is that this divine forgiveness is not without cost. It costs God something to extend forgiveness and it costs us something to experience it. The cost - is that we must forgive in order to experience forgiveness. The cost of grace, that is to say, is grace... which is a wonderful irony only God could think up.

One time Jesus told a story about it. Actually the story is a response to Peter who, with characteristic short-sightedness but a bit of style, said one time: "Jesus, if my neighbor wrongs me, how many times should I forgive him? Seven?" The rabbis taught that there was the appropriate limit to forgiveness. If your neighbor offends you three times, forgive him. On number four, let him have it! How expansive, therefore, of Peter... who, no doubt, expected to be commended by Jesus for his mercy and generosity.

The trouble is that Peter hasn't heard the Gospel yet. Peter is still counting. It's still quantitative: - seven instead of three. Jesus' response... "not seven times but seventy times seven," quite simply alters the ground rules. He has used an idiom: seventy times seven means, not four hundred ninety; but infinity. There are no limits, no restrictions, no conditions when we're talking about forgiveness. Then the parable.

A servant owed his King an enormous debt: 10,000 talents. The King prepares to exercise his normal option of selling the man and his family into slavery to recoup a bit of his loss. The servant begs for mercy, "I'll repay everything," he says. That's supposed to make you laugh. One talent - is a day's wages... This man owes 10,000 talents and is proposing to work everyday for twenty-five years with no weekends, vacation or sick leave, to pay his debt. It's hyperbole. This is not a payable debt. But the King doesn't laugh. Incredibly, he does it; cancels the debt, forgives the man. It's unheard of - until you think about it a bit and then what he did begins to look like the one creative option he had, i.e. now he has a forgiven servant, rather than a very angry slave and a few dollars. The

King's behavior is radical only because it is so uncommon. Actually it is practical. The King will be ahead if he forgives, except for the fact that the forgiven servant now does something embarrassingly human.

On his way home to tell his wife the incredible good news that they are free, he runs into a fellow servant who had borrowed about twenty dollars from him. Our man seizes his debtor by the lapels, demands his money and when the poor soul asks for a little time, our man calls the police and has him thrown in jail. The news gets back to the King who becomes very angry at his ungrateful and unforgiving servant, changes his mind, has him thrown in jail too. "So also God will do to you" Jesus said, "if you don't forgive your brother or sister from your heart."

That's one of the most provocative things he ever said, I believe. You can't separate being forgiven from forgiving. There is a profound and almost mystical connection between experiencing divine grace and extending it to others. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," he taught them to pray. The experience of grace and the discipline of grace are not separable.

Let's start with our own reluctance to forgive others. What is there about us that makes us so adept at keeping track of the wrongs we have suffered, almost savoring them and then, when the time is right, opening up the shoot and dumping the whole load of resentment and anger on our spouse or colleague or friend? Frederick Buechner says that of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is the tastiest - that we love to savor its delicious flavor. Who here hasn't kept account of the offenses and like Peter, settled back to wait until the final straw in order to even the score? Who hasn't rehearsed the speech for that glorious moment when we open up full barrel on the person who deserves what we're going to give them? Relationships sometimes accumulate this stuff for years and when the time comes the aggrieved can recite the offenses with such accuracy that you know that this person has been waiting and planning for this moment for a very long time. Who hasn't done it? Or, or least, who hasn't waited, in a kind of regal, righteous, indignation for the other to come to his or her senses and apologize? It's the way we are apparently, but according to Jesus, it's not the way we have to be.

There is an alternative. It is far more creative. It is restorative rather than destructive. It is called forgiveness. His insight was that it belongs to the offended one. The offender can apologize, make amends, do penance..., but forgiveness is the offended one's to enact and give and make happen... Nothing is more meaningless, I suppose, then forgiveness that is neither wanted nor needed. The very worst line ever spoken in a motion picture was - "Love means never having to say you're sorry." That is baloney, absolutely and utterly wrong. Love means knowing that human intimacy always produces reasons for people to be angry. If a couple tells me they have not yet found anything in each other to be angry about, have never had an occasion to be just a little put off, they probably don't yet know one another. Good human relationships depend on the strength and honesty to say - "I was wrong. I was stubborn. I was mean. I'm sorry."

But that alone does not produce healing. If there is not another factor in the equation, the apology becomes simply a bargaining chip. The

necessary word belongs to the offended. It is the word of grace. It says "I forgive you. What you have done need not keep us apart." And there is a sense in which we have trouble forgiving others because we have trouble hearing that word.

There is no doubt about our need. The Freudians are right, of course. We carry deep within us the suspicion that we are not loved and forgiven and accepted. There is a sense in which we live out our lives trying to earn and demonstrate our worthfulness, our acceptability - sometimes to parents who may have been dead for years, sometimes to spouses and lovers and friends, sometimes to God. There is no doubt about our need. In an age that no longer confesses its sin, an age that is offended by the very concept of sin, and therefore finds it very difficult to say "I'm sorry" for anything, physicians and psychiatrists serve as priests, hearing confessions and assuring guilty, hurting people, that they are acceptable, worthy, forgiven.

There is no doubt about our need. But there is misunderstanding here. In our eagerness to say the Good News - that God forgives and accepts - we sometimes make it sound as if our misdeeds don't ultimately matter, that God's mercy is so abundant and free that our own side of the ledger is irrelevant. Heinrich Heine quipped, "I love to sin - God loves to forgive sin. Really this world is admirably arranged." [see William Muehl, Why Preach - Why Listen?, p. 60]

The Gospel is that God is capable of outrageous grace, that God loves us with an everlasting love. The Gospel is not that this grace doesn't cost anything. Grace cost God the life of an only son... It is a gift, a very precious, costly gift - for which God has paid.

The good news is that it comes without condition. The radical, liberating good news is that all the devices religion thinks up to persuade God to be gracious - are useless. God has paid the price. Jesus died to set us free.

The cost is that to enter into that grace, to be forgiven, you and I have to let go of guilt, let go of a whole way of thinking about ourselves and about other people, - and live as God's gloriously free and forgiven children. The cost of grace is grace.

The cost is that we have to live forgiven - which means forgiving.

It is stunning to behold. The New York Times Magazine last Sunday reported the powerful story of Beulah Mae Donald whose son was senselessly, and without provocation, lynched in 1981 by members of the Ku Klux Klan. At the trial, one of the young men, who had confessed and was about to be sentenced, in an unlikely scenario, turned to her and begged her forgiveness. "I can't bring your son back," he said, sobbing. "God knows if I could trade places with him I would. I can't. Whatever it takes... I will have to do it..."

And Mrs. Donald, a very modest woman of very modest means, who doesn't have much education or money, or sophistication but who clearly knows more than a little gospel and a lot about grace, said to the man who

killed her young son, "I do forgive you. From the day I found out who you all was, I asked God to take care of y'all, and he has." [New York Times Magazine, 11/1/8]

The defendant, the jury, the judge - all wept, the Times reported.

Forgiveness, you see, frees the offender - and the offended. Forgiveness frees the forgiver. Forgiveness frees the one who has done something wrong from guilt. But it also frees the one who is wronged. That's the miracle of it - and that is what we see in Jesus Christ...

- a love with the power to restore instead of destroy...

- a love with new possibilities...

- a powerful love that can actually pick up the broken pieces of a precious human relationship and mend it, put it back together...

We dare to say it, after our own corporate confession...

"In Christ - we are new people altogether. The past is finished and gone. Everything is fresh and new."

For generations we have tried to sing it, because we can't fully explain it intellectually.

"Amazing Grace! How sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see"

Believe it. Trust it. Live it. Sing it.

Amen.